

Touching the Untouchable

Luke 17: 11-19

The Hindu caste system has several levels, but then there are those who are not even part of the caste. They are off the bottom of the scale. These are the untouchables. In the religious system of Judaism, lepers were untouchable. They were considered unclean and an abomination.

As Jesus continued on his road trip to Jerusalem, he was encountered by a group of ten men with leprosy. They approached Jesus undoubted because of his reputation as a healer, but they did not get too close. As a sign of respect, the lepers stood at some distance from Jesus and cried out, "Have mercy. Be compassionate to us."

Lepers were ostracized from the religious society of Judea and, since there was no real hope for a cure, they had little hope for being restored to that community. Salvation was a communal concept for the Jews so being cut off from the community brought with it the threat of eternal separation – a literal and figurative hell on earth.

The lepers stayed some distance away and, in return, Jesus respected them and did not try to touch them. He told them to go to the priest. He meant that they should present themselves for reconciliation to the community. Evidently, they turn immediately to go and show themselves to the priest. What we do know is that they left Jesus and, as they left, they were healed. The implication is that they were cured by their act of faith of turning to go in obedience to Jesus.

One of the men who formally had leprosy went straight back to Jesus praising God at the top of his voice. He was giving thanks most sincerely and threw himself at Jesus' feet – "Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! At this point, the other nine are out of the story. They did nothing wrong. They were just following Jesus' instructions on their way to the priest.

The other nine were all Judeans. Just one was a Samaritan, an outcast to the Judeans. While they were lepers, all ten were ostracized by society. They came together to form an unorthodox community. Among them, the Samaritan was tolerated. Once they were all healed, the other nine were back in the mainstream. The Samaritan, though, was still a Samaritan, an outsider among the Judeans. Jesus sent him to the priest as well, indicating that he was restored to the community and thus to God.

We cannot really know how this event might have been interpreted when it happened. In the text of Luke's Gospel, it was the Samaritan who was in touch with the deep reality that the Kingdom of God was for all people, not just the Judeans. He was in touch with extreme gratitude to God perhaps because he had more for which to be grateful.

Jesus touched, healed, and restored. It was much more than physical healing, as good as that can be. His healing represents the oneness of all people in God – the new reality taught and brought by Jesus. This was the meaning of Jesus then and now.

Who are the untouchables for us, today's lepers? What is untouchable in our world? Are there people we need to be touching? Are there situations or relationships that need our healing touch as the metaphorical hands of Christ today?

Have you experienced the touch of Christ through another person in your life? This will be something different to each person, but the touch of Christ brings of sense of wholeness, freedom, healing, or hope depending on your need. Have you experienced

that healing touch through the life of another person? Perhaps you have felt that touch in the form of comfort in grief, solidarity in danger, friendship in loneliness, guidance in confusion, or even a kick in the rear when you're stuck! Whatever the form of that touch, it comes in a way that can change your life.

The language of faith is often symbolic and metaphorical. It is an effort to describe profound and deep experiences in language that is very concrete and tangible. *The Spirit* is an image we use to describe the presence of Christ with us. That presence touches us, is present and real to us, and encounters us at the deepest places of our awareness. It touches places of hurt or fear. It illuminates shadows of our inner world often in response to the loving touch of another person or people on our life.

The story of Jesus healing the ten lepers conveys the image of his touching the deepest hurt and fear of their lives. For those men, the sense of shame, isolation, and the fear of dying alone was probably more painful even than the physical disease itself. As we hear this story, we can enter it by opening ourselves to its meaning for our lives. Perhaps we can experience that gentle touch in our places of hurt or fear?

Luke's Gospel relates this story in an effort to shine the light of the truth of Jesus' teaching for the community of people for whom he was writing. It was told for the purpose of conveying a larger truth than the healing of the physical and emotional suffering of ten people. This truth is that God includes all people in the Kingdom. Lepers and Samaritans are included. The untouchable people and places of our time our lives are included in what God is creating. You and I are included and we are called to be agents of inclusion.

There is another perspective to the meaning of this story. There is an additional way of letting the story teach us about ourselves. There is another place the touch of Christ is needed and available in our lives – the place of possibility and dream.

Are there places in your life you want to go? Are there heights you want to touch or amazing things you want to do that you have not yet done? What is keeping you from touching them? What is keeping you from climbing to that height? Another way of understanding the touch of Christ, the call of the Spirit in our lives, is the call to dream. The Christ touch encourages us to dare to dream even a seemingly impossible dream.

We hear lots of talk these days about dreaming. The imagery of making dreams come true is used to sell everything from retirement annuities to Caribbean vacation property. These commercials are so successful selling us products because we all have dreams. We want life, our relationships, and our experience of living to be better than it is now. We want to fulfill what we've begun to build or achieve now. We want the world to be better for our children than what we see now.

To be absolutely honest, our most fundamental and powerful dreams often involve being successful in some sense -- as we define success. Many of our dreams involve getting ahead or at least catching up? These are not bad dreams, but they do raise the question, "What is *ahead*." More important, "where is *ahead*?" Which way are we looking and moving in our lives?

The Spirit calls us, you and me and also us as a community of faith, not only to dream, but to dare to own our most profound dreams and make them come true. That's why a church like Crossroads is here – to help you and me sort out where *ahead* is and which of our dreams is worthy to pursue with passion and in partnership with the Spirit.

It takes hard work and support, and a certain sense of daring, to make dreams come true. It takes asking questions, enduring times in the wilderness, and reaching to touch the heights. That's what we do here at Crossroads Church. We encourage you to ask your questions. We invite you to bring your doubts. We challenge you to reach for your dreams because they will be the vehicles through which you touch others with the love of Christ.

The community of Crossroads Church is here to help you feel the touch of Christ and help you touch what the Spirit calls you to pursue, to make your most important dreams come true. On this special festival day, I invite you to walk your life's journey with us, to share your journey with us, and be the hands of Christ for someone else.